

## Persons of the Two Vehicles and Bodhisattvas Cannot Attain Buddhahood in the Pre-Lotus Sutra Teachings



**Q**UESTION: It is said of some teachings that through them persons of the two vehicles can never attain Buddhahood. Does this mean that through them bodhisattvas likewise can never attain Buddhahood, or does it not?

Answer: In volume two of the *Lankāvātāra Sutra* we read: “[Bodhisattva] Great Wisdom,<sup>1</sup> what is meant by the group who are without the nature of enlightenment? It means the *icchantikas*. Great Wisdom, the *icchantikas* do not have the nature to attain nirvana. Why? Because when it comes to the possibility of emancipation they do not have a believing mind, and therefore they will never enter nirvana.

“Great Wisdom, the *icchantikas* are of two kinds. What are the two kinds? The first kind is those who have burned all the roots of goodness. The second kind is those who, feeling pity and compassion toward all living beings, vow to save all those in the realm of living beings.

“Great Wisdom, what does it mean to burn all the roots of goodness? It means to speak slanderously of the storehouse of bodhisattva teachings, saying, “These do not accord with the teachings of the sutras, the monastic rules, and emancipation, and will cause one to abandon the roots of goodness.”

Because they say such things, they can never attain nirvana.

“Great Wisdom, those who out of pity for living beings take a vow to save all those in the realm of living beings are called bodhisattvas. Great Wisdom, these bodhisattvas as an expedient means make their vow, saying, “So long as there are other living beings who do not enter nirvana, I myself will not enter nirvana!” Therefore these bodhisattvas and *mahāsattvas* do not enter nirvana.

“Great Wisdom, the persons described above constitute the two kinds of *icchantikas*, or those who are without the nature to attain nirvana. And for this reason they invariably pursue the way of the *icchantika*.”

“Bodhisattva Great Wisdom then said to the Buddha, ‘World-Honored One, of these two kinds of *icchantikas*, which will never enter nirvana?’

“The Buddha replied to Great Wisdom, ‘Those *icchantikas* who are bodhisattvas and *mahāsattvas* will never enter nirvana. Why? Because they know that all things in their original state are in nirvana. Therefore they do not enter nirvana.

“But this is not true of those *icchantikas* who have cast aside the roots of goodness. Why? Because, Great Wisdom, if those *icchantikas* who have

cast aside the roots of goodness should meet with a Buddha or with a good friend, then they will conceive a desire for enlightenment and will cultivate good roots and thus be able to attain nirvana.’”

In this passage from the sutra, one should note the words “So long as there are other living beings who do not enter nirvana, I myself will not enter nirvana.”

In the sutras that represent the first four of the five flavors, it is said that persons of the two vehicles cannot attain Buddhahood. If that is so, then it would seem that in the four types of teachings<sup>2</sup> represented by the four-flavor sutras, it must be impossible for bodhisattvas as well to attain Buddhahood.

The Flower Garland Sutra says, “Until all those in the realm of living beings have been saved, my vow will not be fulfilled.”<sup>3</sup>

All bodhisattvas invariably take the four universal vows. And if they do not fulfill the first of those four vows, which says, “Living beings are numberless: I vow to save them,” then they can hardly claim to have fulfilled the fourth vow, which says, “Enlightenment is supreme: I vow to attain it.”

In view of all this, if persons of the two vehicles cannot attain Buddhahood through the sutras preached in the first forty and more years of the Buddha’s preaching life [of which the Buddha said, “I have not yet revealed the truth”<sup>4</sup>], then it is hardly possible for bodhisattvas to fulfill their vow [to save all living beings].

Question: What passages of proof can you offer to support the view that if persons of the two vehicles cannot attain Buddhahood, then bodhisattvas likewise cannot attain Buddhahood?

Answer: Volume thirty-six of the Nirvana Sutra states, “Though one believes that living beings possess the Buddha nature, one supposes this does

not mean that all of them invariably do so. This is called the state of insufficient belief.” (Volume thirty-two in the thirty-six volume version of the sutra.)

If we go by this passage, we must understand that the bodhisattvas of the teachings that are likened to the first four of the five flavors are all to be regarded as icchantikas. In such teachings, persons of the two vehicles cannot attain Buddhahood. And not only can persons of the two vehicles not attain Buddhahood, but bodhisattvas likewise are numbered among those who cannot attain Buddhahood. In view of this, we can see that in the sutras designated by the passage “In these more than forty years [I have not yet revealed the truth],” since persons of the two vehicles cannot attain Buddhahood, bodhisattvas likewise cannot do so.

In *The Essentials of the One Vehicle Teaching* we read: “Volume thirty-six of the Nirvana Sutra states, ‘Though one believes that living beings possess the Buddha nature, one supposes this does not mean that all of them invariably do so. This is called the state of insufficient belief.’ (Volume thirty-two in the thirty-six volume version of the sutra.)

“Volume thirty-one of the same sutra says, ‘To believe that all living beings, including icchantikas, possess the Buddha nature is the first of the ten rules<sup>5</sup> to be followed by bodhisattvas, and is known as sufficient belief.’ (Volume thirty in the thirty-six volume version of the sutra.)

“This makes it clear that when the sutra says that all living beings possess the Buddha nature, it does not mean that only a small portion of them do so. To insist that ‘all’ means only a small portion not only contradicts what is said in the sutra, but represents a state of insufficient belief. But why would one deliberately choose to enter such a state and thus become an icchantika? From this we can see that what is

meant is that all living beings possess the Buddha nature. And from this one may logically conclude that all living beings can attain Buddhahood."

Tz'u-en's *Praising the Profundity of the Heart Sutra* states: "Seen in terms of their great compassion for living beings, bodhisattvas are always to be regarded as icchantikas. But seen in terms of their great wisdom, it is only natural to conclude that they can attain Buddhahood. Pao-kung says, 'To call them icchantikas of great compassion is to see them in terms of the teachings set forth in the pre-Lotus sutras. But it is not permissible to use the earlier teachings to criticize the later teachings. The commentaries of the Buddhist scholars are for the most part in agreement on this point.'"<sup>6</sup>

A commentary on *The Diamond Scalpel*<sup>7</sup> states: "The object to be observed through practice is the four noble truths. The realm of birth and death made up of the hundred worlds and three thousand realms is indeed characterized by suffering. And when we come to realize that this realm of birth and death is none other than nirvana, this is what is indicated in the first of the four universal vows, 'Living beings are numberless: I vow to save them.'

"The hundred worlds and three thousand realms are permeated by the three categories of illusion. And when we come to realize that these earthly desires [or illusions] are none other than enlightenment, this is what is indicated in the second of the four vows, 'Earthly desires are countless: I vow to eradicate them.'

"To realize that the realm of birth and death is nirvana, that is, to gain enlightenment into the Buddha nature of the perfect teaching, is what is indicated in the fourth of the four vows, 'The Buddha way is supreme: I vow to attain it.'

"And to realize that illusions are

enlightenment and that all are part of wisdom is what is indicated in the third of the four vows, 'The teachings are endless: I vow to master them.'

"Since illusions and wisdom are not two different things, living beings and Buddhas must be one in entity. And since suffering and the cause of suffering are products of the mind alone, the four universal vows are thus resolved and brought to fulfillment. The one is the many, the all—that is what these words are saying."

The Great Teacher Jikaku in his *On the Quick Attainment of the Stage of Buddhahood*<sup>8</sup> says: "First of all, it is only through the power and effectiveness of this sutra, the Lotus, that the Buddha is able to fulfill his vow to convert living beings. Therefore he appeared in the world and preached it. It represents the causal stage or process by which the Buddhas attain enlightenment, the fulfillment of the four universal vows to benefit living beings, cut off earthly desires, master the doctrines, and attain Buddhahood.

"Since the cause is perfect and the result fully satisfactory, one can fulfill the three latter objectives. But the first vow, that aimed at benefiting living beings, is extremely difficult to fulfill. The power of the Flower Garland Sutra is insufficient to insure that all beings in the Ten Worlds attain the Buddha way, and the same may be said of the Āgama, Correct and Equal, and Wisdom sutras. And the teachings that in the Nirvana Sutra are likened to the five flavors are similarly incapable of fulfilling the Buddha's original objective, which was to enable all beings to attain the Buddha way.

"But now when we turn to the Lotus Sutra of the Wonderful Law, it becomes clear that all beings in the Ten Worlds can attain the Buddha way. Devadatta had fallen into the hell of incessant suffering, and yet he is given a prophecy that he will become

a Buddha named Heavenly King. The dragon girl attains Buddhahood, the ten demon daughters likewise gain the Buddha way, and the asuras are given prophecies that they will attain Buddhahood. Human beings, heavenly beings, persons of the two vehicles, bodhisattvas of the first three of the four teachings—all are able to attain the perfect and wonderful Buddha way.

“Thus in the Lotus Sutra the Buddha says: ‘What I long ago hoped for has now been fulfilled. I have converted all living beings and caused them all to enter the Buddha way.’” Since those in the realm of living beings are numberless, even though there may be those living beings who have yet to enter the Buddha way, the power of this sutra insures that all living beings in the Ten Worlds attain the Buddha way. Since this is so, the Buddha’s original vow to benefit all living beings has been fulfilled.”

He also says: “First of all, if we were to clearly state the overall meaning of the Lotus Sutra of the Wonderful Law, it is that the Buddhas appear in the world for one great reason alone, namely, to teach that all living beings possess the Buddha nature, and that if they heed the Law and observe the religious practices they will all be able to attain Buddhahood.

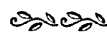
“For what reason did the Buddha teach that all living beings in the Ten Worlds possess the three inherent potentials of the Buddha nature? Bodhisattva Vasubandhu in his *Treatise on the Buddha Nature*, in the first section that deals with dependent origination, states: ‘The Thus Come One, in order to free living beings from the five types

of faults and allow them to gain the five types of virtues, teaches that all living beings possess the Buddha nature.’

“The five types of faults are (1) to possess an inferior and unworthy mind, (2) to possess an arrogant mind, (3) to cling to what is unreal and illusory, (4) to slander the true doctrine, and (5) to think only of oneself. The five types of virtues are (1) assiduousness, (2) reverence, (3) wisdom, (4) knowledge, and (5) great compassion.

“To doubt that one can bring forth the Buddha nature and therefore to fail to set one’s mind on the attainment of enlightenment is what is meant by possession of an inferior and unworthy mind. To be confident that one possesses the Buddha nature and to go about declaring that one has set one’s mind on the attainment of enlightenment is what is meant by possession of an arrogant mind. Though all things are lacking in an inherent self, to cling to the idea that they have a self is what is meant by clinging to what is unreal and illusory. To deny and speak slanderously of the wisdom and blessings inherent in the purity of all phenomena is what is meant by slandering the true doctrine. To be conscious only of one’s own existence and to have no wish to show pity toward all living beings is what is meant by thinking only of oneself. By replacing these five faults with the five virtues and understanding once and for all that all beings possess the Buddha nature, one can set one’s mind on the attainment of enlightenment.”

Nichiren



## Background

Though the date and recipient of this writing are unknown, because its con-

tent seems to follow a similar line of reasoning as that seen in *On the Ten*

*Worlds*, written in 1259, it is considered to have been written around the same time. These writings explain from various angles that neither persons of the two vehicles—voice-hearers and cause-awakened ones—nor bodhisattvas can attain Buddhahood through the pre-Lotus Sutra teachings; that only the Lotus Sutra enables them to do so.

This writing consists of two questions and their corresponding answers. The first concerns whether those sutras that deny persons of the two vehicles the attainment of Buddhahood can still enable bodhisattvas to do so? To this, Nichiren Daishonin answers in the negative, explaining that, because those sutras preached before the Lotus Sutra do not permit persons of the two vehicles the attainment of Buddhahood, they cannot lead bodhisattvas to that goal either. In Mahayana Buddhism, bodhisattvas make four universal vows, the first of which is to save, or lead to enlightenment, all people, and the last,

to attain enlightenment themselves. It is the nature of bodhisattvas to put off their own nirvana until they fulfill the vow to save all others.

If persons of the two vehicles cannot attain Buddhahood, then how can bodhisattvas fulfill their vow to save all people? With this vow unfulfilled, they too cannot attain Buddhahood. Thus, the pre-Lotus sutras, by taking the position that persons of the two vehicles can never attain Buddhahood, deny Buddhahood to bodhisattvas as well.

The second question is about reliable passages from the Buddhist scriptures and commentaries that support the view stated above. In response, the Daishonin cites passages from the Nirvana Sutra, *The Essentials of the One Vehicle Teaching* by Genshin, Tz'u-en's *Praising the Profundity of the Heart Sutra*, and Jikaku's *On the Quick Attainment of the Stage of Buddhahood*.

## Notes

1. Great Wisdom is the leading bodhisattva appearing in the Lankavatāra Sutra.

2. A reference to the four teachings of doctrine. See four teachings of doctrine in Glossary.

3. A rephrasing of the passage in the Flower Garland Sutra.

4. Immeasurable Meanings Sutra.

5. The other nine rules are to (1) observe the precepts, (2) be intimately associated with good friends or good teachers, (3) pursue a state of tranquillity and quietude, (4) be assiduous in practice, (5) achieve a state of concentration of mind, (6) perceive the mind of others and discourse with them accordingly, (7) propagate the correct teaching and make offerings to one who strives in propagation, (8) offer to one's

comrades in practice what they need, and (9) obtain wisdom, especially wisdom leading to perception of the inherence of the Buddha nature within all people.

6. This passage is not found in Tz'u-en's *Praising the Profundity of the Heart Sutra*, but is cited in *The Essentials of the One Vehicle Teaching* as coming from *Praising the Profundity of the Heart Sutra*. The priest Pao-kung (418–514), commonly known as Pao-chih, was criticized for using occult powers and deluding people, but later won the respect of Emperor Wu of the Liang dynasty.

7. *The Commentary on "The Diamond Scalpel"* written by Dengyō. See also *Diamond Scalpel* in Glossary.

8. This work is no longer extant.

9. Lotus Sutra, chap. 2.